Iran is Not Iraq

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The irony is readily apparent: Donald Trump, who ran for president on the promise of ending America's "forever" wars of Middle Eastern regime change, has just launched a war aimed at, seemingly, changing the regime of Iran. Washington is suddenly filled with, alongside schadenfreude, warnings that U.S. Operation Epic Fury—together with Israeli Operation Roaring Lions—will mire the United States in another protracted and inconclusive bout of nation-building, like in Afghanistan or Iraq and/or destabilize Iran and the region, unleashing chaos and more conflict, like in Syria or Libya.

But Iran is different. Just like predictions that confronting Iran would provoke World War III are proving unfounded, as the United States and Israel are quickly degrading Iran's offensive capabilities, so too will claims that it will end up just like Iraq or Syria. Such assertions expose the limitations of reasoning solely by analogy, of automatically assuming that this war will be just like other Middle Eastern wars, without also pausing to consider the divergences between this case and those.

Iran is unlikely to be Iraq—or any of the other Middle Eastern crises that are being invoked—because it is different both as a U.S. military campaign and as a socio-political entity. The regime in Iran might, let us hope, change, but that does not make this a "regime change war" with U.S. troops committed to a long-term nation-building project. And should the Islamic Republic lose its grasp on power, there is good reason to believe that the result will not be chaos. The conditions that made Iraq or Syria so combustible—sectarian divisions, radicalizations, and external power meddling—are largely absent in Iran. That does not mean stability will necessarily flourish immediately in Iran, but that whatever comes next is more likely to leave the United States, Israel, the Middle East, and Iranians themselves better off and safer than they were before.

Initial Military Similarities End There

While Operation Epic Fury might share the same initials as the opening stages of the war in Afghanistan (Operation Enduring Freedom; OEF) the similarities end there. Fury, after all, is fleeting.

What happens next in Iran depends, in large part, on U.S. and Israeli military operations: what their targets are; how effective they are at finding and hitting those targets; how long they persist; and, ultimately, the objectives they are pursuing and the conditions under which they end. For now, although Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth refused to rule it out, there are no U.S. troops inside Iran aiming to topple the Islamic Republic and U.S.-run nation-building is not among the many and various objectives President Trump has articulated.

Instead of invasion, occupation, regime change, and nation-building, the United States and Israel appear to be focused on depriving Iran of its arsenal of aggression. This has two elements. First, removing the Islamic Republic's ability to threaten those outside its borders—with its nuclear program, missile and drone arsenals, navy, and other weapons. Second, targeting its means of domestic repression, including

the infrastructure of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Ministries of Interior and Justice, Basij, and prisons. The decapitation of the Iranian regime serves both these goals, both by making it harder for Iran to organize effective retaliation and by creating a leadership vacuum.

Taken together, this creates the conditions for Iranians to seek a new political arrangement. But whether they seize that opportunity, whether they succeed in it, and what form it takes appears to be left entirely up to Iranians themselves. Not only do they not have boots on the ground, but, at least at first, there was no indication that either the United States or Israel is coordinating with or supporting any Iranian groups on the ground. This campaign is truly, as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said, looking "for the brave Iranian people to take their destiny into their own hands." Now it appears that the United States might have found some of those brave Iranians among the Kurds and is more actively working to provide them support to stand up to the regime.

This is not to say that there is no American plan whatsoever. Or that, a failure by Iranians to seize the moment would mean a failure of the operation. Trump, with his suggestion of multiple off-ramps and willingness to speak with Iranian officials, appears open to accepting some version of the current regime, under new leadership, being left in power, presumably after agreeing to the dismantlement of its nuclear and missile programs. This outcome for Iran —choosing a compliant successor from within the existing regime, as Trump did with Vice President Delcy Rodríguez after ousting Maduro in Venezuela in January— is certainly far less desirable than the toppling of the Islamic Republic.

Whether or not it is the president's preferred solution, or only a backup option if Iranians fail to rise up and topple the Islamic Republic remains unclear. It might not even be possible for, as Mehdi Parpanchi, the executive editor of *Iran International*, argued on a JINSA webinar, caving to Trump's demands would automatically deprive any official of the legitimacy to lead the Islamic Republic. But the mere fact that Trump is seemingly open to accepting some continuation of this regime indicates that, while the length of this war might be measured in weeks, it will not be a protracted, open-ended engagement measured in years.

Indeed, the greatest threat of failure for the United States comes not from too long a war, but too short of one. The main form of failure could take is leaving the Islamic Republic with the ability to project power and launch external attacks after the United States has declared an end to combat operations. This would be a failure of will, not might. The steady decline in the number of Iranian missile launches—JINSA has recorded a 95 percent decrease between February 28 and March 3—is indicative of the effectiveness and speed at which U.S. and Israeli forces are finding and destroying Iran's missiles and launch capabilities. While drones will continue to pose a challenge, and exist in greater numbers, the continued application of force should similarly degrade their threat.

Nevertheless, no conflict is risk- or cost-free. But both are very different than those the United States suffered in Iraq and Afghanistan. American servicemembers have suffered casualties, and will unfortunately suffer more, from Iranian projectiles. Their numbers will be orders of magnitude less than the thousands lost in the war on terror. The billions of dollars this conflict will cost the United States will come in the massive expenditure of offensive and defensive munitions, as well as sustaining a large force in the Middle East. It will have a long tail of diminished readiness as the U.S. military empties its stockpiles and runs its air and naval assets ragged. But it will not be a cost in the trillions spent on deploying hundreds of thousands of troops or supporting another country's basic services.

Missing Conditions for Chaos

Uncertainty about U.S. objectives in Iran opens up concerns that weakening the regime will only unleash long-term instability, chaos, and conflict in, and emanating out of, Iran. If the United States, with over a hundred thousand troops, could not stabilize Iraq or Afghanistan after toppling their autocratic regimes, why should the fall of the Islamic Republic not leave equal amounts of disorder in its wake? If attempts to bring down strongmen in Libya and Syria—one successful, the other not—embroiled both countries in yearslong civil conflicts that drew in extremist forces and outside powers, why would a weakened Iran not spark similar conflagrations?

The answers lie both in the significant differences between Iran and these examples of strife as well as the geostrategic context of the current military campaign compared to those in which those other conflicts took place. Where chaos unfolded and conflict roiled societies for years, if not decades, three ingredients were present: major ethno-sectarian cleavages; extremist groups and radicalization; and interference by external powers. The first of these two factors are not entirely absent from Iran, but significantly diminished compared to Iraq, Syria, or Libya. The third is also a much lesser concern.

Society and State

Most importantly, Iran is stronger politically and less fractios socially than Iraq or Syria. It has a long history of self-rule, with well-established political institutions and national symbols. Its borders and identity, unlike many other Middle Eastern states, did not significantly change in the 20th century nor were they subject to arbitrary divisions by external powers. Whereas Iraq and Syria were assembled from Ottoman administrative units under European supervision after World War I, Iran entered the modern era as an already coherent political entity with a deeply rooted sense of nationhood.

The Persian language and a rich literary tradition stretching back a millennium—from Ferdowsi to Rumi to Hafez—reinforced a shared civilizational identity that long predated the Islamic Republic and even the Pahlavi monarchy. Modern Iranian nationalism evolved and adapted over time, but it was not imposed from abroad. That continuity matters as it provides a reservoir of institutional memory and national cohesion that can survive regime change.

Further, Iran lacks the major ethno-sectarian fissures that divide Iraq or Syria. Nor is the current autocratic regime run by a minority group that has long oppressed the majority. Persians comprise roughly 61 percent of the population, and the country is approximately 90 percent Shia Muslim—a stark contrast to Iraq, where a Sunni Arab minority of just 24 percent long dominated a Shia majority comprising 55 to 60 percent of the population, and to Syria, where an Alawite minority of roughly 10 percent ruled over a 70 percent Sunni majority under Bashar al-Assad. A change in regime in Iran would therefore not unleash the cycle of Sunni-on-Shia violence and vengeance that fueled years of fighting and radicalization in Iraq or Syria.

Nevertheless, minority groups in Iran do face genuine restrictions on civil and political rights and may use this moment to press their claims—or more. Significant minorities include Azerbaijanis (approximately 16 percent), Kurds (around 10 percent), and smaller communities of Lurs, Arabs, Baluch, and Turkic groups. Sunni Muslims—concentrated largely among Kurds, Baluch, and Arabs—comprise around 9 percent of the population, alongside small communities of Christians, Jews, Baha'i, and Zoroastrians.

In the event of a sudden collapse of central authority, localized unrest is possible—particularly in Kurdish or Baluch-majority regions. While five Kurdish opposition groups have formed a coalition, and have already demonstrated their ability and willingness to stand up to the Islamic Republic, their stated desire is

autonomy within a decentralized Iran. Select Baloch separatist factions have also undertaken similar coordination efforts, but lack the size, territorial control, or external backing necessary to sustain an insurgency—unlike the Shia militias supported by Iran in Iraq, or the Taliban sheltered by Pakistan.

Thus, unlike Iraq in 2003 or Syria in 2011, and again in 2025, Iran would not be entering a regime transition from a position of sectarian demographic inversion or artificial state construction. Diversity and grievance do not automatically translate into state failure. Nevertheless, to minimize the chances of civil strife, the United States and its partners should be engaged with both Iranian opposition and minority groups going forward to ensure that, if and when the Islamic Republic does fall, the demands and rights of all living within Iran are taken into account.

Violent Extremism

Iraq, Syria, and Libya all became breeding grounds for Sunni jihadist groups, exploiting the grievances and resentments of local communities to recruit fighters, stoke conflict, and seize territory. This pattern is unlikely to repeat itself in Iran.

First, and perhaps most importantly, the greatest source of radical ideology inside Iran is the Islamic Republic itself. The fall of the regime would also mean the removal of a significant source of extremist propaganda and recruitment, both within Iran and in the broader Shiite, and even Sunni, world.

Second, and relatedly, as a predominantly Shiite population, Iranians are seen as the enemy, not recruitment targets, of the Sunni Salafist groups that have wreaked havoc across the Middle East and now Africa. Neither al Qaeda nor the Islamic State would find much of a toehold in Iran. If there are extremist groups that might seek to intervene, it would be the Islamic Republic's own proxies. But these have largely been degraded. Neither Hamas nor Hezbollah has the ability to muster forces to undertake an insurgency in Iran. The Houthis in Yemen are not only much further away but have never previously fought abroad on behalf of the Islamic Republic, so there is little reason to believe they would do so now. Only Iraq's Shiite militias might have the ability to help the regime hold on to power or attempt to disrupt the formation of a political alternative. But they are likely to be too preoccupied with struggling to maintain their own power and influence inside Iraq, absent their Iranian patron, to devote significant resources to fomenting unrest in Iran. And, with proper pressure, Baghdad, suddenly no longer torn between Washington and Tehran, might finally be more amenable to reining in these groups.

Third, the sectarian grievances on which extremism feeds are much less pronounced in Iran, as discussed above, and they would not be inflamed by the weakening or fall of the regime. Iranians resent the oppression of the Islamic Republic, but they do so equally and without assigning blame for 47 years of injustice to the regime itself, rather than to a rival ethno-sectarian group.

If anything, toppling the Islamic Republic creates the conditions to address and moderate what extremism already exists within Iran. Some terrorist groups exist within Iranian minority groups, among both Baluch and Kurdish communities, as a response to the Iranian regime's oppression. The fall of the regime and creation of a new political process that would grant those groups greater rights and representation could create the conditions to resolve their grievances and reduce the influence and appeal of extremist elements.

External Meddling

Another factor that has exacerbated Middle Eastern conflicts has been involvement by outside powers. This element is also likely to be lacking in Iran.

Most significantly, it has been the Islamic Republic that has been the most destabilizing actor in the Middle East, fomenting or fanning conflict across the region. In Iraq, it armed extremists with weapons and explosive devices that took the lives of over 600 American servicemembers. In Yemen, it trained and equipped the Houthis who stormed the capital and provoked a civil war. And in Syria, it sent in advisors, proxies, and militias to keep its client, al-Assad, in power, even if that meant using chemical weapons, dropping barrel bombs in urban areas, and slaughtering more than 500,000 civilians. With the Islamic Republic gone, the greatest source of conflict in the Middle East will be gone, too.

Also gone from the Middle East is another world power that has meddled in and prolonged regional conflicts: Russia. Unlike 2015, when Moscow was sending forces to fight in Syria and Libya, Russia is now a declining power, consumed by its war in Ukraine, and unable or unwilling to involve itself in the Middle East. Moreover, it was the U.S. absence that created the conditions for Russia to insert itself into those prior conflicts. With Operation Epic Fury, the United States has shown that it is present and engaged in shaping the future of Iran and the Middle East, making Russia even less likely to consider intervening.

Perhaps the only country that could seek to insert itself into and disrupt the weakening or fall of the Islamic Republic is Turkey. Ankara would see the possibility that a new political arrangement in Iran might lead to greater autonomy for or recognition of the Kurds as highly threatening to its interests. As it did in Syria, Turkey could seek to prevent such a possibility by intervening militarily or finding proxies to do so on its behalf, perhaps among Iranian Azeri or Turkmen communities. It will be imperative that President Trump use his close relationship with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to dissuade and, if necessary, prevent and punish any such Turkish intervention.

Iran is not Iraq, Syria, or Libya. Operation Epic Fury is not without risks, but neither creating a quagmire for the United States nor unleashing chaos and extremism are among them.